



Public Health  
England



# Flu, your pregnancy and you

What you need to know and do to protect yourself and your baby

Withdrawn March 2022



Flu **i**mmunisation 2015/16

Helping to protect everyone, every winter

Pregnant women are at increased risk of getting serious complications from flu, compared with other healthy adults.

Flu can also be serious for new-born babies, who can catch the infection from their mothers.

**This leaflet describes how having the flu vaccination during pregnancy can help protect you and your baby against this infection.**

## What is flu?

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Flu is a highly infectious disease. The symptoms, that come on very quickly, include fever, chills, headaches, aches and pains in the joints and muscles, and extreme tiredness. A bad bout of flu is worse than a heavy cold. You are likely to spend a few days in bed. Serious infections, although less common, can lead to hospitalisation, permanent disability and even death.

## What causes flu?

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Flu is caused by viruses that are spread from person to person. They infect the respiratory system (wind pipe and lungs), where they can lead to pneumonia and other complications. The viruses can change every year which is why people have to be vaccinated annually.

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## How is flu spread?

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When an infected person coughs or sneezes, they spread the flu virus in tiny droplets of saliva over a wide area. These droplets can then be breathed in by other people or they can be picked up by touching surfaces where the droplets have landed. You can prevent the spread of the virus by covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, and you can wash your hands frequently or use hand gels to reduce the risk of picking up the virus. But the best way to help avoid catching and spreading flu is by having the vaccination before the flu season starts.

## How can I avoid catching flu?

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Because people are infectious a day or so before the symptoms start to show (as well as up to seven days after), they won't know if they are spreading the virus or not.

So it's very hard to avoid contact with people infected with the flu virus. And, of course, members of your family can always bring it into the home.

You can wash your hands regularly but this won't stop you catching the disease by breathing in the infected droplets in the air.

**The best way to avoid getting flu is by having the vaccination.**

## Why does being pregnant make it more serious for me if I get flu?

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When you are pregnant, your body naturally weakens your immune (defence) system to ensure that the pregnancy is successful. As a result, you are less able to fight off infections compared with when you are not pregnant. This means that if a pregnant woman catches flu, she is much more likely than a woman who isn't pregnant, to be admitted to hospital or, on rare occasions, be admitted to intensive care and even die.

## How does my baby benefit if I have the vaccination?

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Young babies are also at high risk of being seriously ill if they catch flu because their immune (defence) system is not fully developed and they are too young to be given flu vaccine. Your baby will benefit if you have the flu vaccination because:

- you are less likely to get ill with flu and suffer complications such as pneumonia, particularly in the later stages of your pregnancy
- getting flu during pregnancy can lead to an increased risk of miscarriage, premature birth or having a low weight baby. Having the vaccination reduces the chances of getting flu which in turn means the risk of these complications is much reduced

- it will help protect your baby who will continue to have some immunity to flu during the first few months of its life
- you will continue to be protected throughout the flu season, and so be less likely to pass flu onto your new born baby

## **But I thought pregnant women weren't supposed to have vaccinations.**

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Since 2009, a large number of developed countries have introduced routine flu vaccine programmes for pregnant women. This experience has shown that there are no reported safety issues relating to flu vaccination and the pregnancy or the baby.

## **Will I get any side effects?**

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You may get a sore arm at the site of the injection, a low grade fever and aching muscles for a day or two after the vaccination. Serious side effects are uncommon.

## **When should I have the vaccination?**

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The flu vaccine needs to be given during the winter season – you can safely have the vaccine at any stage of your pregnancy from conception onwards. You will need the flu vaccination each flu season if you are pregnant because the flu viruses may have changed by the time you visit your GP and/or midwife during your next pregnancy. You will be given the vaccination as an injection in the arm.

## Are there any other vaccinations I should have during my pregnancy to protect my unborn baby?

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Yes; you should have the whooping cough vaccine but this needs to be given ideally between 28 and 32 weeks to provide the best protection to the new born baby.

You can have this vaccination at any time of the year.

For more information please see [www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/whooping-cough-vaccination-pregnant.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/whooping-cough-vaccination-pregnant.aspx)

## How many vaccinations will I need?

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If you are pregnant, you will only need one flu vaccination in each flu season. If you are expecting more than one baby you will only need one vaccination.

## I think I might have caught flu, what should I do?

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You should talk to your GP urgently and mention that you are pregnant. There is a medicine you can take that can help with relieving some of your symptoms but it has to be taken as soon as possible after the symptoms appear for it to be of any help.

However, the best way of protecting you and your baby against flu is to have the vaccine, if possible before the flu season starts.

## **I had flu before getting pregnant – aren't I immune now?**

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You can't be sure you're immune because there are several flu viruses around at any one time and you won't know which one you have had. The flu vaccine helps protect against the three or four viruses most likely to be circulating, so you should have the vaccination to get the best protection.

## **I had the flu vaccine last time I was pregnant, do I still need to have it now that I am pregnant again?**

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Yes; the flu viruses can change every year, so the vaccines are changed to match them. Being vaccinated one year won't protect you during the next.

## **I've heard of some children having the vaccination as a nasal spray. Can I have that instead of an injection?**

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The nasal spray vaccine is a live vaccine. Although there's no evidence of harm caused to pregnant women by having the nasal flu vaccine, the injected flu vaccine is preferred for pregnant women as it is not a live vaccine.

## **Who will give me the vaccination?**

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Your GP, or possibly your midwife or pharmacist will be able to give you the vaccine, probably during September or October before the flu season starts. For women who become

pregnant during the winter the flu vaccine should still be available and you can have it at any stage of pregnancy.

## **Will I be completely protected by the vaccination?**

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By having the vaccination you will be significantly reducing your risk of getting flu but no vaccine offers 100% protection. By reducing your risk you will also be reducing the risks during your pregnancy and for your baby once they are born. Because the flu virus can change from year to year there is always a risk that the vaccine does not match the circulating virus. During the last ten years the vaccine has generally been a good match for the circulating strains although last year it was less so.

## **Where can I get more information?**

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Speak to your GP, midwife or pharmacist or visit the pregnancy and flu pages on the NHS Choices website at: [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/Pages/flu-jab-vaccine-pregnant.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/Pages/flu-jab-vaccine-pregnant.aspx)

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